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## **LOCAL WV 211 RESOURCE COORDINATOR SPENDS 3 WEEKS**

### **ASSISTING HURRICAN VICTIMS**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Friday before I left for Monroe LA, I attended a Citizen Corps Conference on September 1<sup>st</sup> in Charleston WV. I have in my notes from that day that "I need more disaster training so I can find how WV211 can fit into the plan". I had no idea the learning lessons I would soon acquire.

In the days following Hurricane Katrina, I sat in front of the TV with tears for the people affected by the disaster. I told my husband Harold that there must be a way for me to help and hoped an opportunity would open up. I am the resource coordinator for WV211 and believed I have skills the 2-1-1 in LA could use. I hoped there would be a call out for volunteers and I wanted to go.

An email from United Way of America requesting help in a Call Center being set up in Monroe, LA came soon afterwards. I asked my bosses if I could go and the answer was clear that if United Way of America paid for the trip, I could. Our 2-1-1 here in WV is deficient in funding and could not bear the price of my traveling that far. I purchased the ticket with the promise of being reimbursed by United Way of America and booked a round trip taking me to Monroe, LA for three weeks. I had at one time in my life been a volunteer manager and knew that most volunteers would be sent for a week long slot. I knew three weeks would provide a consistency that a week might lack.

I arrived at the Call Center housed at the United Way of Northeast Louisiana on Hudson Lane in Monroe about 4pm on Sept 7<sup>th</sup> and began an extraordinary education I could not have gotten in any other fashion. I arrived from the airport with two others sent as volunteer staff from Las Vegas, NV. I began taking calls from those affected by the recent hurricane. I was dismayed to find binders with pages and pages of information to use as our directory to the resources available in the area, particularly the Northeast region of LA. I am accustomed to using a database on a computer, not paper! And where was the information for the whole of LA?

I'd been assigned a host family for housing during my time there and Mr. Hale picked me up at 8pm that first evening. With a hearty laugh he told me I had a choice of staying at his family's home where I would share a bedroom with his six year old grandson or I could use his daughter's boyfriend's apartment. So I had an apartment to myself since Tanner would be staying at his mother's home nearby. I didn't know until later what a blessing it would be to be able to leave the chaos of the call center to a haven of aloneness and quiet. I sure do appreciate the generosity of that 26 year old young man that I never did meet in person.

Harvey Hale transported me to the Call Center the next morning. We had all our meals provided by the staff and local volunteers. Terrific food three times a day! Adrienne trained us to be able to take calls and I spent the next eleven hours answering the telephone and trying to provide answers to diverse requests from those evacuated and those who had not been evacuated from New Orleans as well as the other Parishes in the now devastated area. I was saddened and frustrated by the lack of resources we had on hand to help those who needed so much. We gave information and referrals we could and asked the caller to please continue to call back again in twelve to twenty four hours because we were receiving new information all the time and might be able to give them more assistance when they called again.

LA contains several 2-1-1's to cover the state regionally. The United Way of NE LA houses a small 2-1-1 center covering their local area with Jan Wawizyniak as Director. The other 2-1-1's were in Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Lake Charles, Shreveport, and New Orleans. This small local operation in Monroe grew into a very large 2-1-1 with the help of 2-1-1 professionals from all over the country. United Way of America sent Peter Bishop, 2-1-1 Manager and Trisha Ferrell, 2-1-1 Lead Associate to Northeast Louisiana to expand its existing call center by setting up a 56 phone bank during the crisis. Floridians Oscar, Stephanie and Lynette, who last year experienced hurricanes, brought their new found 2-1-1 disaster expertise to the table. Janet S. Durden, President of United Way of Northeast Louisiana expanded her operation and made every effort to make things go as smoothly as possible. I began to wonder if that woman ever slept. She was on top of every detail and a wonder at managing the momentous task brought into her United Way.

The call center was in a room that used to be a Board room. A data resource room and a volunteer resource room supplemented the call center. The building hummed with activity 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Local volunteers came in to help the

professional volunteer staff answer calls, help with data entry, prepare meals, host out of towners in their homes, provide transportation and added a dollop of warmth, hugs and smiles to the long days and nights.

My third day there, I was mentoring some locals on how to answer the phones and the needs presented. I answered their personal questions and told them I felt blessed to be there to help, we were being fed well and I was grateful to have an apartment to myself. The only amenity I missed was having a car. Carolyn offered me her car to use the remainder of my time there.

That same day I was offered a shift supervisor position in the call center and I accepted. Now that I had a car I could go in at 7AM to assist with transition from night to day shift and leave at 7pm allowing Heather, the other shift supervisor to facilitate the 8pm transition from day to night shift. Yup, we all worked twelve hour days or nights. They were lengthy days filled with stories that brought out all sorts of emotional responses, excellent food and goodies, fellowship and fun. Even short term relationships on the phone or in the building were intensely intimate and rewarding. One friend I made was Ann, an evacuee from Gulf Port, Mississippi who answered calls in our call center helping others who lost everything just like she had and another young friend who was my right hand gal, Brittney from Utah.

Callers were so happy to hear a human voice and get some direction and those answering the phones grew close to one another in our common cause to help the best we could. I don't remember when it happened but we got new phones in the call center and some time after that we received brand new computers from HUD.

Before Adrienne left to go back to Utah, she trained me to do the orientation training in addition to continuing as shift manager. Michele Robinson was always busy putting out fires so I helped to do the daily scheduling. They were long, busy and rewarding days.

We were just beginning to receive different requests. Other than food, water and shelter, now the victims of Katrina were looking for clothing, blankets, school information and furniture. Those hosting evacuees were seeking assistance to feed and clothe the up to 20 or more persons that now occupied their households. We in the call center watched as the news predicted another hurricane, this one named Rita. Within a few hours we were attempting to help those who evacuated once to evacuate again and to give routes and information to those in new areas in LA get to safety.

We knew TX was also evacuating a major portion of the southeast corner. What we didn't expect were the calls that began to pour in from TX to our call center. Some TX 2-1-1 lines were pointed at our call center in Monroe! We scrambled to search out and provide information to these TX callers. Our data resource room provided us with TX maps, evacuation routes and shelters. Autos were running out of gas on the TX highways, people were frightened and frustrated. Call center operators were relieved when we discovered fuel trucks would be providing gas and could give the callers that information.

Monroe sits in the north east of LA and most believed we were safe from the hurricane. The news we got about the possible tornados spooked those of us who had never weathered one. A generator was brought in and we hurriedly mapped out what we could do in an emergency, found flashlights, and then went back to work manning the phones. I believe we took over three thousand calls that day and had over a thousand calls that night. At the end of my shift I went back to the apartment and wondered how I would know if a tornado was going to hit us at 4AM while I was sleeping. I was too exhausted however to let it keep me awake.

The next morning we found more Parishes were devastated and we began taking the 2-1-1 calls from Lafayette and Lake Charles area. We had been receiving the overflow calls from Baton Rouge on a daily basis, but now that Baton Rouge had taken on water as well, we were receiving even more. We called in all the local volunteers we could to help answer calls. We assisted in evacuations, giving FEMA and Red Cross numbers, the procedures to follow and hoped life would return to normal sooner rather than later. Several hours later we found yet another Parish needing evacuation. 2-1-1 was certainly instrumental in the emergency response to this a new hurricane disaster. We hadn't even begun to get all the help to the first set of folks. It was temporarily disheartening.

I had a melt down once a week from the intensity of what we were experiencing. Most of us did... The crisis team on the call center floor, local staff and a crisis team brought in from Gainesville, GA helped the volunteers keep a perspective on what we were trying to accomplish. One local volunteer, Cathy scooped me up and took me to her home for a few hours and another, Lou made me a farewell dinner. Everyone was so generous with their time, talents and good souls. I had a debriefing session with Dana, a counselor just before I left that helped tremendously.

I learned so much. I have a better understanding of what our WV211 needs to contain in its database and the Memorandums of Understanding we need to have with other agencies, other states and federal governmental agencies. Being prepared on a personal, community, local, region and state level is so so crucial to being able to provide the best possible assistance to those in need during and after a disaster, any kind of disaster.

WV211 is ahead of some other states because we have a one call center state and we have already begun to have and do have partnerships and working relationships with some fundamental organizations. But of course there is much to do. I look forward to continuing with and being a part of this vital information and referral system. I am so grateful to have had this opportunity in LA and here at home in WV.

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